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### THIS 16TH-CENTURY WOODCUT

shows a pregnant woman sitting in a birthing chair, attended by 3 women, at least 1 of whom (seated, at left) is a midwife. This image was published in *Ein schön lustig Trostbüchle von den Empfengnussen und Geburten der Menschen* (A Very Cheerful Booklet of Encouragement Concerning the Conception and Birth of Man) in 1554.<sup>1</sup> The book was written by Jacob Rueff (1500–1558), a surgeon and obstetrician in Zurich. Rueff was responsible for the instruction and examination of midwives in Zurich and, indeed, had copies of his book sent to all the midwives in the region.

Much of Rueff's book is essentially copied from Eucharius Rösslin's *Der Swangern Frauen*

und Hebammen Rosegarten (The Rose Garden for Pregnant Women and Midwives), 1513, the first printed work dealing exclusively with obstetrics—and also intended as an instruction guide for midwives.<sup>2</sup> In the later work, Rueff added some new material from his own experiences and placed more emphasis on the use of instruments as aids to childbirth. In this image, for example, one can see the obstetrical instruments and equipment on the table behind the women, whereas in Rösslin's almost identical image, the background is plain. Rueff advocated new obstetrical instruments such as the toothed duck beak forceps and the use of internal and external manipulation for footling (feet first) presentations.

# Early Modern Childbirth

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Some version of the birthing stool or chair had been used for millennia, there being evidence of its use in Egyptian papyri and the Old Testament.<sup>3,4</sup> The chair shown here incorporates certain early modern technical innovations, such as the sloping back that allows the birthing woman to recline slightly during contractions. One scholar even argues that this birthing chair was itself a technical innovation inspired by male professionals as a way to gain control over the birthing process and to displace earlier practices in which pregnant women sat on the laps of their birth attendants.<sup>5</sup> As male midwives and obstetrical attendants gradually wrested control of the birth process from female midwives and from women themselves, the birthing chairs would be replaced by flat beds, these being more convenient to the person in charge of the "delivery."

Birthing chairs are now making something of a comeback in modern obstetrics as case-control studies are finding that their use may reduce the pain of childbirth, diminish perineal trauma, decrease the need for episiotomies, and increase the mother's satisfaction with her birthing experience.<sup>6–9</sup> ■

Requests for reprints should be sent to Elizabeth Fee, PhD, Building 38, Room 1E21, 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 (e-mail: elizabeth\_fee@nlm.nih.gov).

**Note.** Most of the Prints and Photographs Collection of the History of Medicine Division of the National Library of Medicine may be viewed through the online database "Images From the History of Medicine" at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>. The Web site also provides information on ordering reproductions of images. If you have a print, photograph, or other visual item that might be appropriate for this collection, please contact the History of Medicine Division.

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